

X-RAY CAMERA**FIELD OF THE INVENTION**

The present invention relates to X-ray camera used in medical diagnosis,
5 dentistry, and the like.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

X-ray camera of the kind known heretofore include:

conventional X-ray camera used in medical diagnosis for taking
10 photographs of joint regions such as hands and feet, chest, and so on; and
intraoral X-ray camera and panoramic X-ray camera used in dentistry.

As for the method of displaying images, it has been a general practice to
print out X-ray images on films for use as monochrome pictures.

In recent years however, there evolved another method of displaying an
15 image that uses a variety of digital techniques after transferring an X-ray image
onto a special fluorescent film.

Some of the techniques proposed for use in the method of displaying images
include:

a CR (Computed Radiography) technique, in which a fluorescent
20 image is read by using laser, and stored as a digital image;

a technique, in which a combination of charge coupled device
(hereinafter referred to as "CCD") and fluorescent material is used to read
directly as a digital image in a similar manner as the video photography;
and

25 a technique, in which a combination of TFT (Thin Film Transistor)

panel and photo diode, in combination with fluorescent material is used to read directly as a digital image in a similar manner as the video photography.

Unlike the case of using films, an X-ray camera that uses the digital
5 techniques as above represents a method of expression, in that the equipment accurately reads an X-ray photographic image pixel by pixel, and composes a complete image by realigning again the individual pixel data obtained therefrom on a display device.

For this reason, any defect of pixels of the CCD, the TFT, and the like,
10 manufacturing dispersion of the reading circuits for individual pixels, and so on are reflected just as they are in the pixel data. This has been the failure peculiar to the digital X-ray photography that deteriorates picture quality of display images as typified by slight variations in brightness.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is to solve the foregoing problem of the prior art technique, and intended to improve picture quality of X-ray photographic images.

To achieve the above-described problem, X-ray camera of this invention comprises:

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an X-ray irradiation unit;

an X-ray image sensor;

a controller comprising a correction factor setting unit, a correction factor storage unit, and a correctional operation unit; and

a display unit.

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The X-ray image sensor in the above configuration comprises:

a sensor such as CCD, TFT, and the like having a scintillator on a surface of it; and

a substrate having the sensor mounted thereon.

The correction factor setting unit (hereinafter referred to simply as "setting unit") obtains a value L_a/L_n for an arbitrary pixel "n" by dividing a predetermined brightness reference value L_a set beforehand by a brightness value L_n of the arbitrary pixel "n", and sets the obtained value as a correction factor of each pixel.

The correction factor storage unit (hereinafter referred to simply as "storage unit") stores the correction factor set by the setting unit.

The correctional operation unit (hereinafter referred to simply as "operation unit") obtains the correction factor from the storage unit, and performs a corrective operation.

The display unit displays an image, which is corrected by the operation unit.

The X-ray camera of this invention, with the configuration as described above, cancels errors in brightness caused by inherent dispersion of the sensors and image detector circuits peculiar to the X-ray camera, by making correction of brightness of the image obtained in the photography, and thereby it can realize substantial improvement in quality of the X-ray image.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is an illustration depicting a configuration of X-ray camera of a first exemplary embodiment;

Fig. 2A is a diagrammatic illustration showing an aspect of taking an X-ray image of a subject 1 serving as a reference;

Fig. 2B is a diagrammatic illustration showing an example of brightness

distribution of the image of the subject 1 obtained with an X-ray image sensor 2 along a row of pixels in a one-dimensional direction;

Fig. 3A is a diagrammatic illustration showing an aspect of taking an X-ray image of a model subject;

5 Fig. 3B is a diagrammatic illustration showing an example of brightness distribution of the image, obtained with the X-ray image sensor by taking photograph of the model of step-wise configuration, along a row of pixels in a one-dimensional direction;

10 Fig. 3C is a diagrammatic illustration showing the brightness distribution after correction;

Fig. 4 is an illustration depicting an example of another configuration of the controller shown in Fig. 1;

Fig. 5 is a flow chart showing an operational flow of the X-ray camera of the first exemplary embodiment;

15 Fig. 6A is an expository illustration depicting operation of X-ray camera having a sensor configuration described in a third exemplary embodiment;

Fig. 6B is a diagrammatic illustration showing an example of brightness distribution of an image, obtained with the X-ray image sensor 2 of the third exemplary embodiment, along a row of pixels in a one-dimensional direction;

20 Fig. 6C is a diagrammatic illustration showing the brightness distribution after corrected according to the third exemplary embodiment;

Fig. 7A is an expository illustration depicting operation of X-ray camera having a sensor configuration described in a fourth exemplary embodiment;

25 Fig. 7B is a diagrammatic illustration showing an example of brightness distribution of an image, obtained with the X-ray image sensor 2 of the fourth

exemplary embodiment, along a row of pixels in a one-dimensional direction; and

Fig. 7C is a diagrammatic illustration showing the brightness distribution after corrected according to the fourth exemplary embodiment.

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THE BEST MODE FOR CARRYING OUT THE INVENTION

With reference to accompanying figures, X-ray camera of the present invention will be described hereinafter.

(First Exemplary Embodiment)

Referring now to Fig. 1 through Fig. 5, a first exemplary embodiment of this invention is described hereinafter.

Fig. 1 is an illustration depicting a configuration of the X-ray camera of the first exemplary embodiment of this invention. As shown in Fig. 1, the X-ray camera of the first exemplary embodiment comprises:

- an X-ray irradiation unit 100;
- an X-ray image sensor 2;
- a controller 200 comprising a setting unit 4, a storage unit 5, and an operation unit 6; and
- a display unit 300.

A reference numeral 400 shown in Fig. 1 schematically illustrates a subject for the X-ray equipment.

As shown in Fig. 2A, an X-ray image sensor unit (hereinafter referred to simply as "sensor unit") 20 in the above configuration comprises:

- an X-ray image sensor (hereinafter referred to simply as "sensor") 2 such as CCD, TFT, and the like having a scintillator on a surface of it (not shown in the figure); and

a substrate 7 having the sensor 2 mounted thereon.

A corrective operation of brightness of a photographed image displayed in the display unit 300 is described now.

Fig. 2A diagrammatically illustrates an aspect of taking an X-ray image of a reference subject 1. In Fig. 2A, when X rays are irradiated to the reference subject 1, the X rays penetrated through the subject 1 are converted into light signal by the scintillator (not show in the figure), and detected as an image by the sensor 2 mounted on the substrate 7.

Fig. 2B diagrammatically illustrates an example of brightness distribution along a row of pixels in a one-dimensional direction of the image of the reference subject 1 obtained by the sensor 2. Fundamentally, value of brightness shall be invariant from pixel to pixel. However, the value of brightness varies slightly from pixel to pixel as shown in Fig. 2B, due to an inherent dispersion of the sensor 2, detector circuits (not show in the figure), or the like.

Therefore, the setting unit 4 obtains a value L_a/L_n for an arbitrary pixel "n" by dividing a predetermined brightness reference value L_a by a brightness value L_n of the arbitrary pixel "n", and sets the obtained value as a correction factor of each pixel. Here, the brightness reference value L_a is a design value of the sensor 2, and therefore the value of brightness that should naturally be output.

The correction factor for each pixel obtained by taking the X-ray image of the reference subject 1 is stored in the storage unit 5.

Described next pertains to a corrective operation carried out according to the correction factor obtained above for brightness of an image taken by X-ray photographing a step-wise configuration model 3, which typifies a subject body. The step-wise configuration model 3 is composed of aluminum and the like, to

represent a subject body in place of a human body.

Fig. 3A diagrammatically illustrates an aspect of taking an X-ray image of the model serving as a subject body. In Fig. 3A, when X rays are irradiated to the step-wise configuration model 3, the X rays penetrated through the step-wise configuration model 3 are converted into light signal by the scintillator (not show in the figure), and detected as an image by the sensor 2 mounted on the substrate 7. Fig. 3B diagrammatically illustrates an example of brightness distribution along a row of pixels in a one-dimensional direction of the image obtained with the sensor 2 by taking photograph of the step-wise configuration model 3. Fundamentally, value of brightness shall be invariant from pixel to pixel. However, the value of brightness varies slightly from pixel to pixel as shown by a line L_n' in Fig. 3B, due to an inherent dispersion of the X-ray image sensor 2, detector circuits (not show in the figure), or the like.

Thus, the operation unit 6 obtains the correction factor from the storage unit 5, and implements a corrective operation by way of multiplication with the line L_n' of Fig. 3B. This operation yields the right brightness value ($L_n' \times L_a/L_n$) for the image. Fig. 3C diagrammatically shows the corrected brightness distribution.

The corrected image is thus displayed in the display unit 300.

With the configuration as described above, the X-ray camera of this invention can substantially improve picture quality of the X-ray image by virtue of canceling errors in brightness caused by inherent dispersion of the sensors and the image detector circuits peculiar to the X-ray camera, through correction of brightness of the image obtained in the photography.

In this embodiment, as described above, the predetermined brightness reference value (design value) L_a was used to obtain the correction factor.

However, an average value of brightness of the entire image may be used as the reference value L_a . Alternatively, it is also acceptable to use a representative value of brightness of the entire image (e.g., a maximum value, a mean value, a minimum value, and the like) as the reference value. Fig. 5 shows an example of configuration of the controller in this case.

A setting unit 4 sets correction factors corresponding to three sorts of values, which are:

an average value of brightness;

a representative value of brightness; and

a predetermined reference brightness value for each pixel of an image obtained by taking an X-ray photograph of the reference subject. A storage unit 52 stores the three sorts of correction factors set as above. When making correction of brightness of an image obtained by taking an X-ray photograph of a subject body, the operation unit 6 obtains a corresponding correction factor among the three sorts of correction factors through a correction factor selection unit 72 in the storage unit 52.

As described above, brightness characteristic of the X-ray image sensor 2 actually in used can be corrected by virtue of making correction responsive to dispersion of the individual X-ray image sensor. An accuracy of displaying the image can thus be improved. Further, feature of individual operation process determines which one to use between the average value and the representative value. In other words, the average value is used when accuracy is required, and the representative value is used when a high-speed processing is needed.

Furthermore, there results in a better improvement of the accuracy when using the value obtained from the division as L_a/L_n for the correction factor to be

set for each pixel, as compared to the use of a difference like $L_a - L_n$, which can be influenced by intensity of external light, illumination, and so on.

As for a reference subject, it may be appropriate to use a soft-tissue equivalent material such as urethane resin and the like to represent muscles and adipose tissue, or a bone-tissue equivalent material such as epoxy resin, aluminum and the like.

Next, Fig. 5 shows an operational flow of the entire X-ray camera of the first exemplary embodiment of this invention.

Upon start of the X-ray camera, a selection is made between setting operation of a correction factor and photographing of a human body (step 1).

If step 1 selects the setting operation of a correction factor at a start of the X-ray camera, the system takes an X-ray photograph of the reference subject 1 (step 2).

The setting unit 4 calculates a correction factor for each pixel based on brightness data of the image obtained in step 2 (step 3).

The correction factor for each pixel obtained in step 3 is stored in the storage unit 5 comprised of a semiconductor memory, a hard disk, and the like (step 4). It returns to the initial state of the system, after the correction factor is stored.

If step 1 selects the subject body to be photographed, it takes an X-ray photograph of the human body (step 5).

The operation unit ⁶~~5~~ obtains the correction factor for each pixel from the storage unit 5, and carries out a corrective operation based on the brightness data of the image taken in step 5 (step 6).

The display unit 300 displays the X-ray image after the corrective operation is made in step 6 (step 7).

The above steps 2, 3, and 4 can be initiated at any timing to reset the correction factor, when the equipment is first installed, when a user determines it necessary, and so on. If the correction factor has already been set and stored, the steps 1, 5, 6, and 7 are normally executed.

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(Second Exemplary Embodiment)

A second exemplary embodiment relates to X-ray camera, which sets plural sorts of correction factors to be stored, as described in the first exemplary embodiment. It is so devised as to be capable of selecting which correction factor to use among those correction factors stored in a plurality of storage means, according to thickness of a portion of a human body to be photographed.

A configuration of a controller 202 of the second exemplary embodiment is analogous to the controller 202 shown in the first exemplary embodiment. Although there is a slight difference in function of their respective configurations, the following description will be made in this exemplary embodiment with reference to Fig. 4, since they are analogous in configuration.

The controller 202 of the second exemplary embodiment comprises a setting unit 4, a plurality of storage units 52 capable of storing correction factors, a selection unit ⁷²~~7~~ for selecting among the storage units 52 a correction factor corresponding to a portion of the subject to be irradiated with X-rays, and an operation unit 6.

In this exemplary embodiment, a photograph is taken by irradiating X rays to a reference subject according to a thickness of photographing portion of a human body to be measured, in the same manner as the first exemplary embodiment.

The setting unit 4 sets correction factors according to the result, in the same manner as the first exemplary embodiment. The storage units 52 then store the correction factors set as above.

When an X-ray photograph is taken for a portion of the subject human body, the operation unit 6 obtains a correction factor for each pixel based on brightness data of the acquired image from one of the storage units 52 that corresponds to the portion of the subject human body, through the selection unit ⁷²~~7~~, and carries out a corrective operation.

Th display unit 300 displays the X-ray image after the corrective operation is made.

Accordingly, the most appropriate correction factor can be chosen according to thickness of the photographing portion of the human body, when the plurality of correction factors having several sorts of different thicknesses of the reference subject are set and stored.

If photographs are taken for two kinds of equivalent materials, a soft-tissue equivalent material and a bone-tissue equivalent material, for instance, the setting unit 4 sets two sorts of correction factors corresponding to the respective equivalent materials. The storage units 52 store the two sorts of correction factors set as above. When making a correction of brightness of the image acquired by taking an X ray photograph of the subject body, the operation unit 6 obtains a correction factor for each pixel from one of the storage units 52, which corresponds to the portion of the subject human body, through the selection unit ⁷²~~7~~, and carries out the corrective operation.

Th display unit 300 can then display the X-ray image after the corrective operation is made.

(Third Exemplary Embodiment)

A third exemplary embodiment relates to X-ray camera for taking an X ray photograph with a plurality of X-ray image sensors arranged in an overlapped manner. Fig. 6A shows an example in which a plurality of sensors are arranged so as to overlap with one another at the analogous portions.

As shown in Fig. 6A, three sets of the X-ray image sensor 2 are arranged in a manner that an effective image-capture area (i.e. an area normally narrower than an overall perimeter of the X-ray image sensor) of each of the X-ray image sensors overlaps with one another, in order to detect an image without any dropout portion. It is so designed that an image captured by the sensor located at the front side toward the subject is taken for the image of the overlapped portion. When X rays are irradiated, a portion between an effective image-capture area and a perimeter of the front side sensor gives a shadow on an effective image-capture area of the sensor placed behind the front one, as shown in Fig. 6B. This causes a phenomenon of partially decreasing the brightness only in the area of this shadow. This phenomenon is the largest problem in the X-ray photography with the plurality of X-ray image sensors arranged in the overlapped manner.

The X-ray camera of the third exemplary embodiment obtains a correction factor for each of arbitrary pixel "n", and carries out a corrective operation for each pixel, in the same manner as described in the first exemplary embodiment. Accordingly, it is proved effective even when the plurality of sensors, arranged in the overlapped manner, are used as the X-ray image sensor, and satisfactory correction of brightness can be achieved, as shown in Fig. 6C.

(Fourth Exemplary Embodiment)

A fourth exemplary embodiment relates to X-ray camera for taking an X ray photograph with a plurality of X-ray image sensors arranged in an overlapped manner. Fig. 7A shows an example in which a plurality of sensors are arranged
5 in a step-wise manner at the analogous portions.

When X rays are irradiated, a portion between an effective image-capture area and a perimeter of the front side sensor produces a shadow as shown in Fig. 7B on an effective image-capture area of the sensor placed behind the front one, in the like reason as the third exemplary embodiment. This causes a phenomenon
10 of partially decreasing the brightness only in the area of this shadow. This phenomenon is the largest problem in the X-ray photography with the plurality of X-ray image sensors arranged in the overlapped manner.

The X-ray camera of the fourth exemplary embodiment obtains a correction factor for each of arbitrary pixel "n", and carries out a corrective operation for
15 each pixel, in the same manner as described in the first exemplary embodiment. As described, it is proved effective even when the plurality of sensors, arranged in the overlapped manner, are used as the X-ray image sensor, and thereby satisfactory correction of brightness can be achieved, as shown in Fig. 7C.

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INDUSTRIAL APPLICABILITY

As has been described, the X-ray camera according to this invention cancels errors in brightness caused by inherent dispersion of the sensors and image detector circuits peculiar to the X-ray camera, by providing a correctional function for brightness of an image obtained in the photography, and thereby it can realize
25 substantial improvement in quality of the X-ray image.

Moreover, it provides for a possibility of correcting image quality precisely according to the subject and portion being photographed, by allowing selection of a method of calculating the correction factor, and a plural kinds of reference subject to be used for setting the correction factor based on a purpose of the
5 photograph.

Accordingly, it is extremely useful for radiographic diagnosis in the medical field.

In addition, it is also adaptable for the correction of brightness in the overlapped area of sensors, in the case of equipment that uses a combination of
10 plural sensors for the purpose of obtaining a wide photographable area, and therefore it is extremely useful again for radiographic diagnosis in the medical field.